

Social Capital, Culture, and Codes in Higher Education: Bourdieusian and Bernsteinian Philosophical Underpinnings in the South Africa Environment

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ABSTRACT

Social capital ignored is an “object of political and ideological struggle” created to stifle working-class students in educational spaces. Furthermore, as societal dynamics are constructed in the student-lecturer relationship, this article seeks to evaluate how deliberative democracy in the online higher education space can inspire care through the ongoing dialogue between student and lecturer. This is framed against the Bourdieusian (social capital) and Bernsteinian (social code) framework because both theorists’ work highlights how the dominant class (represented by lecturers) consciously and unconsciously tends to ignore students’ social and cultural capital and codes. This, in turn, leads to a lack of dialogue and care in student-lecturer relationships in higher education. One of this study’s findings is that higher education is aimed to support more middle-class students. The reason for this is that our findings show that lecturers tend not to know what to do with the social habitus of working-class or disadvantaged students. The aforementioned phenomena were foregrounded through Bourdieusian (social capital) and Bernsteinian (social code) model that is situated in the sociological approach, which is interpretive in nature, to explore whether dialogue and care were shown.

KEYWORDS

Relationship; pedagogy; student-lecturer; social capital and code, online learning and teaching platform; higher education.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, we will be evaluating how deliberative democracy involved in online higher education can inspire care through dialogue (Pietersen, 2022a), by discussing Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital. This includes looking at Basil Bernstein's code theory and how these approaches can be used to cultivate an engaging relationship between lecturers and students that is foregrounded in pedagogical action and dialogue at developing university's online learning environment. Universities Biographical Surveys help to sketch different pictures of student populations. This is crucial in supporting students (both academically and non-academically) in order for students to be successful. However, it is well known that, because of the inequality gap, many students come from disadvantaged backgrounds (Langeveldt et al., 2023). This, in turn, means that schooling for many students is unequally distributed from students going to schools in a township close to a city, while a lot of students go to deep rural schools (Spaull, 2013). Many inferences can be drawn from the aforementioned statements. But the inference we would like to draw on and explore is the fact that students' academic performance can be traced back to the influence of previous schools they attended (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

When digging deeper into the schooling backgrounds of students at university, it becomes clear that students are drawn from a variety of circumstances, ranging from impoverished to working class, on the one hand, to privileged and upper class, on the other (Pietersen, 2022b). In South Africa, these categories are defined according to the economic and cultural capital of the families concerned and the actual geographical location of where people live. Economic and cultural circumstances play a big role in the quality of education students receive or even whether they will receive any type of formal education at all (Allais, Cooper & Shalem, 2019). Furthermore, although many students from lower-class educational backgrounds as outlined above can still become as successful as their middle-class counterparts, one cannot ignore the social habitus that these students bring (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Bourdieu's distinction between working and middle class was made based on his European perspective (Gunn, 2005). In South Africa, it could be argued that the distinction between socio-economic classes is far more nuanced. According to research done by the United Nations University, the majority of South Africans are poor, either chronically poor (49%) or transient poor (12%), with the vulnerable middle class representing 15% of the population (Zizzami et al., 2019).

This is where Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital¹ and Bernstein's theory of social code² are highly influential in making sense of how students at developing universities journey to success in a higher-education environment (Sullivan 2002). Bourdieu's argument is that, to succeed, one must maneuver the higher education space with the associated social capital. This is often possessed by lecturers and middle-class students, whereas lower- or working-class students may experience higher failure rates, if their social and cultural capital is

not acknowledged. Bourdieu defines social capital in the following way: “[an] individual’s social capital might consist of institutionalised networks, such as a family, a class or a political party, but also of networks held together only by the material or cultural exchanges between their members” (Bourdieu, 1986).

In relation to this individual or group’s social frame, Bernstein similarly highlights how the student-lecturer relationship is framed. He points out the “unequal distribution” within higher-education systems and how they can contribute to social upheavals and inequalities. Bernstein (2000:78) elaborates:

Pedagogy is a sustained process whereby somebody(s) acquires a new form or develops existing forms of conduct, knowledge, practice, and criteria from somebody(s), or something deemed to be an appropriate provider and evaluator – appropriate either from the point of view of the acquirer or by some other body(s) or both.

These theories, as defined by Bernstein and Bourdieu, will first be considered. They will be used to problematise how online learning and teaching only benefits some students and not others (Basar et al., 2021). Online learning remains the dominant mode of teaching for lecturers who use this “social code” and their “social capital” to engage with students, which in the words of Bernstein can be said to be “unequal distribution of quality education”. It could be argued that if online learning was properly integrated in a way that acknowledged students’ existing social and cultural capital, this could, in turn, contribute to positive outcomes and enhance students’ performance (de Clercq, 2020). As McLean et al. (2013:37) surmise: “Acquiring the disciplinary knowledge of sociology which has been produced by professional sociologists is, in Bernstein’s term, ‘sacred’ knowledge and tutors are strongly committed to reproducing it in their students.”

The purpose and significance of this study is to:

- argue that social capital and social code are intertwined with online learning in higher education.
- to show how social capital and social code can be powerful constructs in creating positive teaching relationships.
- to highlight the greater upward mobility for students at developing universities.

Social capital and code could be used to enable democracy if students sharing information in class based on their own identity and lecturers using online platforms to support struggling students. In other words, social capital, and code, if acknowledged by middle-class lecturers who mainly teach working-class students, would result in success for students as they progress in life and could result in even further social upliftment and equality (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2016:203).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, the Bourdieusian (social capital) and Bernsteinian (social code) model are situated in the sociological approach. Dimitris et al. (2018), argue that the Bourdieusian and Bernsteinian

sociological model is a cooperative theoretical construction that provides insight for interpreting social impacts at all levels of educational context and societal change. Bernstein made a distinction between what is conveyed and the underlying pedagogic device that structures and organizes the content and distribution of what is relayed (Bertram, 2012). This framework is used for its ability to influence shifts in education regarding the way information and knowledge is disseminated and broadened.

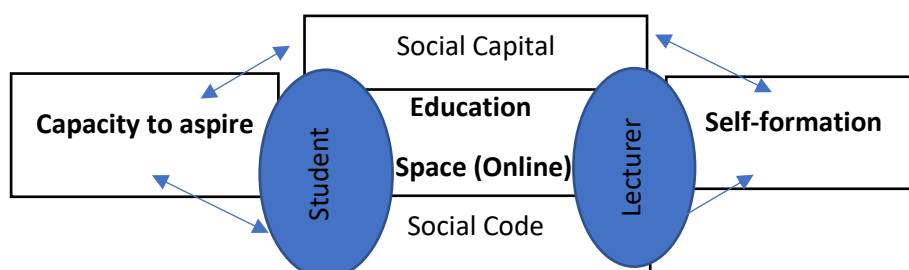
LITERATURE REVIEW

The Bourdieusian and Bernsteinian model

According to Samuelsson et al (2019), deliberative democracy in education can be defined thus: “Deliberative democracy can be seen as a response to some of the challenges facing both contemporary democracies and conceptions of democracy” (p.76). The questions raised in evaluating how deliberative democracy involved in online higher education can inspire care through dialogue is underscored by the sociological theories of Bourdieu and Bernstein. The work of these scholars helps to critically analyse how online learning and teaching platforms are adding to or detracting from the student-lecturer relationship, which does not preclude socio-economic challenges. The student and lecturer’s collective social habitus at developing universities in connection with one another can be demonstrated as follows:

Figure 1.

Relational social habitus and agencies in both student and lecturer



This article will outline precisely how the aforementioned conceptual framework of social capital and code speaks to “ontology, truth and method as it relates to the power relations that exist between student and lecturer, whether known or unknown” (Niati, 2018).

Niati (2018) emphasises that the Bourdieusian and Bernsteinian notion of social capital and code creates a language that seeks to either encourage or restrict educational language. It should be noted that, in South Africa, the kind of language that is used on online learning and teaching platforms can enhance communication or detract from it, as cultural disconnections are easily amplified (Maistry, 2015). According to numerous scholars, social capital does not belong to any one person; rather, it is found in the connections that people make with one another (Lin, 2007; Lorenzen, 2007). This speaks to the vast divide between middle-class lecturers and working-class students. Niati (2018:4) notes:

...every social context brings about its own specific language, and consequently its specific social control. This is the social control which is imposed on individual's habitus and its perceptive development, which paves the way for its resistance...

Bourdieu's way of looking at habitus is to interrogate this kind of education system as a process of cultural and social reproduction. Bourdieu's work was influenced by Karl Marx, who is known as the intellectual founder of the conflict school and higher education institutions in the sociology of education (Sadovnik, 2000b). Bourdieu focused on the concepts of cultural capital and symbolic violence. He saw symbolic violence as power that enforces certain meanings on people; this is seen as a legitimate way of hiding the power relations that might not be considered by the institutions of higher learning, particularly their faculties, where teaching is located.

This power relation is also found in the education system as education benefits the middle class because of the middle class's symbolic representation (Brantlinger, 2003). The representations of cultural dominance consist of many factors, such as language, ideas and knowledge of music, art and literature. The cultural representations that embody these power relations have been analysed by Foucault (1982:792), who posits:

The system of differentiations which permits one to act upon the actions of others: differentiations determined by the law or by traditions of status and privilege; economic differences in the appropriation of riches and goods, shifts in the processes of production, linguistic or cultural differences in know-how and competence, and so forth...

The above-mentioned factors play an integral role in the education system, as well as the working environment of social classes (Pietersen & Platjies, 2023). According to Hillier and Rooksby (2017:23), to have a sense of these social capital and code stratification factors, participants need to understand and "play the game" in the following way:

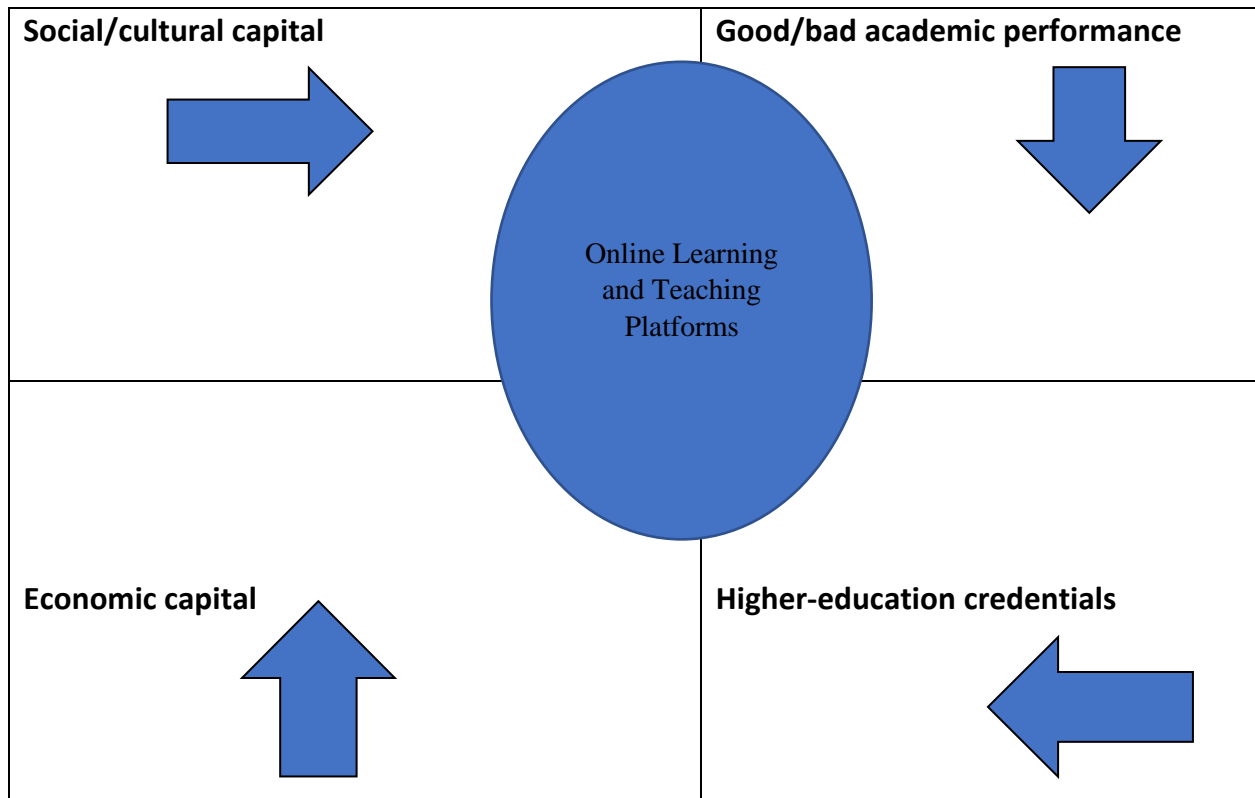
It requires constant awareness of and responsiveness to the play of all actors involved. It requires assessment of one's own team-mates' resources, strengths and weaknesses and also those of the opponents. It requires improvisation and flexibility and above all it requires use of anticipation as to what one's team-mates and one's opponents will do. Behaviours cannot be reduced simply to theoretical rules.

The concept of cultural capital can be used to explain how the education system in South Africa forms part of a socialisation of reproduction (Fataar, 2012). This means that the education system perpetuates the same working-class and middle-class citizens as it always has. This is amplified in many universities in South Africa (Le Grange et al., 2022).

Any education system, including developing universities, has the potential to socialise students into a process whereby the inequality of education is propagated to deliver the working-class student into a working-class job and the middle-class student into a middle-class job (McCrary Calarco, 2018). This is illustrated in the diagram below:

Figure 2.

Relationships and language that exist in an online teaching and learning space



If one considers an online learning and teaching platform, such as Blackboard, from a philosophical framework, one may end up with what Bernstein (2003) called social language that “can be internalised, incorporated, objectified or institutionalised.” Put differently, social capital ignored is an “object of political and ideological struggle” created to stifle working-class students in educational spaces. Furthermore, as societal dynamics are constructed in the student-lecturer relationship, and it is here where inequality is reintroduced (Naiti, 2018), it is this article’s theoretical framework that the online learning and teaching space fits both the Bourdieusian (social capital) and Bernsteinian (social code), because both theorists’ work highlights how the dominant class (represented by lecturers) consciously and unconsciously tends to ignore students’ social and cultural capital and codes. This, in turn, inhibits students’ development and growth – “it is the asset of the bourgeoisie/capitalist” (Moore, 2013). However, every social class comes into the education system possessing a cultural capital, consisting of their own knowledge of music, art and literature, all of which play an important part in the education of students. The way this presents itself in online higher education platforms is in the form of “curricular, pedagogical and pupil evaluation practices” (Anyon, 2016).

In 2020 the DHET commissioned a report to examine students' experiences with distance teaching and learning. The SALUM Report was completed by nearly 50,000 students from 24 public universities. Less than two-thirds of students have laptops or other suitable technology to use for their studies, according to the SALUM poll, and many must rely on cellphones or smartphones. This report shows that,

digital inequality mirrors and often exacerbates socio-economic inequalities. The majority of students also recognised developmental needs in a range of digital skills. That said, there were also many reflections by students on the benefits of learning with technology, including the convenience and flexibility of engaging with studies asynchronously...(SALUM, 2020).

This paper emphasises how socioeconomic classes are reproduced in higher education settings through cultural capital, or more accurately, how cultural capital is not allocated equally among classes. As a result, online higher education aligns well with societal norms, and its curriculum formalises elements of cultural capital that are associated with the middle and upper classes. (Sadovnik, 1991a; Sathorar and Geduld, 2019). Higher education institutions using online teaching platforms build on the prior skills and knowledge of students. Learning does not start from scratch and because of this, the performance of upper- and middle-class students in education is better than working-class students (Lareau, 1987; Calarco, 2018).

Online learning and teaching platforms wrapped in social capital and code

The working-class students enter the South African education system with a distinct disadvantage because of their background, prior educational knowledge and their inability to effectively adapt to the education system (Spaull, 2013). The middle-class student enters school with previous knowledge because that is the way they have been socialised at home, which makes it easier for them to adapt to the schooling environment: they are already familiar with the process, how it works and what is expected of them. The middle-class student grows up in an environment where it is expected of them to perform well in school. They get taught how to read, write and make sense of the world around them – all the basic skills that will help them when they get to school (UNICEF, 2021).

Bourdieu's theory should act as a guideline to lecturers to rectify the problem in our education system. It should give lecturers insight that not all students come to university with the same knowledge levels and cultural capital. Lecturers should identify what prior knowledge students have (both middle-class and working-class students) and then build on that prior knowledge. Lecturers should not assume that all students have the same level of prior knowledge (Hailikari et al., 2008). What they should aim for is to accelerate learning among working-class students, so that they can achieve the same level of academic performance as their middle-class counterparts. As Venter (2019:246) states:

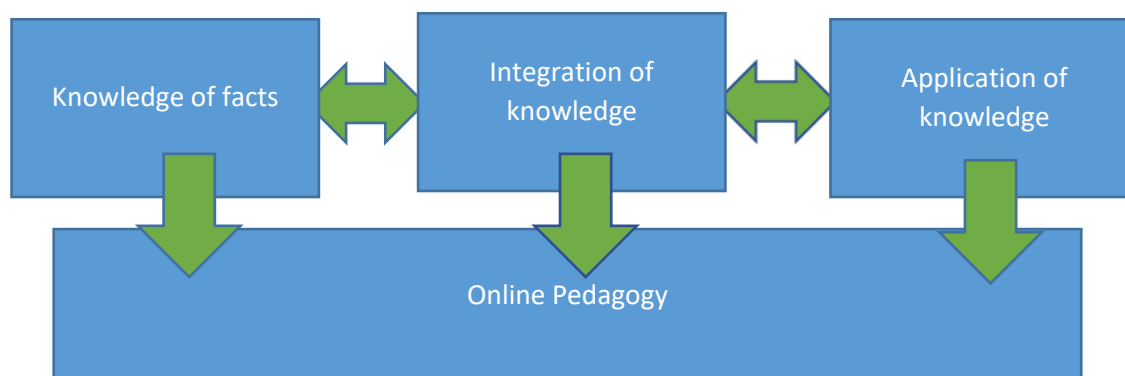
People learn throughout their lives and for different reasons and it can take place in various kinds of environments and contexts. Formal learning constitutes but one part of the overall learning process. This engendered the conceptualisation of a PLE [personal

learning environment] is an all-inclusive and collaborative learning space, as students move within and across different learning platforms.

Basil Bernstein was a British sociologist who introduced the sociolinguistic theory of language codes, which is better known as the code theory. Code theory has two sub-concepts, known as the elaborated code and the restricted code. Restricted code addresses people's underlying presumptions without challenging their bias (Obiukwu, 2019). This goes against a group of common identities and interests, or more precisely, against a cultural identity that lessens the need for people to explicitly state their intentions through linguistic elaboration. While having a close relationship with someone requires a complicated code, knowing them well suggests shared interests, identities, and expectations, although this does not always imply agreement (Iverson, 2018). These codes serve as a way to describe the class differences through the use of language (Jones, 2013). Bernstein interrogates why social capital is important to consider for students at higher education institutions. This is why the researcher has chosen his theory as a means to evaluate how deliberative democracy involved in online higher education can inspire care through dialogue. The figure provided below shows that pedagogy is interdisciplinary; Bernstein's code is foregrounded in the "weak grammar of knowledge" or "prior knowledge" between working-class students' habitus. It also shows how the hierarchy of knowledge is deliberately developed through the lecturer's habitus. See this unfold in the diagram below:

Figure 3.

Online learning and teaching in accordance with social habitus



The code serves as a set of organising principles behind the language employed by members of a social class. Bernstein created the code theory as a way to explain how on the macro level, the social, political, economic and other institutional structures of society are connected through the way they understand systems of meaning (Sdovnik, 2008c). This led to the exploration of how certain social capital and code are able to impact the ability to learn among the different social classes.

Bernstein's code theory focused on the different speech patterns between the two social classes and their ability to attain quality education. The restricted code is seen as context

dependent, meaning that the restricted code will only be understood by the people that are within that specific context on a daily basis. The code does not just apply to the speech or words used by working-class people, but also to meaning and intentions, like gestures and voice intonations. Jansen (2020) explains this phenomenon of social class and how it interacts with educational attainments as follows:

With screen teaching, I cannot see, hear or touch... A nod, a frown, eager hands shooting up all over the place are vital behavioural cues about who “gets it” on a slippery concept, such as a “theory of action” in policy analysis, and who does not... A screen does not give me those vital data points in real time to (re)adjust my teaching.

The restricted code represents the working class because they are socialised in their environment. The code also explains the relationship between the occupation of working-class people and the code they use to communicate with each other. The restricted code can also be seen as shorthand speech because of the way people speak to each other in short, unfinished sentences. One-word answers can sometimes mean more than explaining something in detail for those using the restricted code because that is the way they were socialised and the way they understand each other. McNay (2008:279) expresses this concept as follows:

... the way in which unique personal experiences are infused with regularity and uniformity insofar as they are the product of institutions. Immediate corporeal being contains within it the latent marks of abstract social structure. ... From the perspective of the habitus, emotions are not elemental or spontaneous givens, but are a type of social relation that are generated by and mediate the interactions between embodied subjects and social structures.

The middle class makes use of the elaborated code (Costa et al., 2015). This code is universal and is not bound by context. In addition, it is more detailed and complete than the restricted code. Those that use the elaborated code communicate in full sentences and their thoughts are well constructed.

Engaging the South African context and social capital and code

The higher education system in South Africa, including developing universities, is structured in such a way that it may largely benefit middle-class students because lecturers do not know what to do with the social habitus of working-class students (Yee, 2016). Le Grange et al. (2022), posits that, “technology is not limited to hardware and software, digital or otherwise, but does include resource accessibility and process issues, such as pedagogy and ideological issues related to socioeconomic concerns around the nature, form, use and diversity of users, including diversity of access to technology.”

Most South African higher education institutions make use of the elaborated code: lecturers assume all students are able to perform well on online platforms, as they share knowledge with students from varied socioeconomic strata. This way of teaching excludes the fact that there are students who operate using a restricted code – not having access to the same resources and unable to engage online the way that other students do. Automatically, the

working-class student is at a disadvantage because they have to adapt to the elaborated code first, before they are able to grasp the knowledge that the lecturer wants to teach them (Arnot and Reay, 2006).

Only once the elaborated code has been mastered, will students benefit from the information that is being taught to them (Stahl, 2015). Any learning and teaching platform represents socially conscientised and educated people. To this broader learning and teaching end, Waghid et al. (2019:4) claim:

South African universities, in particular, are now being challenged by the Department of Education to embark on the pursuit of shaping their pedagogical activities in light of the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution on the grounds that such educational efforts would hopefully contribute towards economic prosperity, job creation and empowerment of marginalised communities.

In order for faculties at developing universities to contribute meaningfully to marginalised communities, we have to elaborate on the code that students use. Indeed, much analysis is needed, so that generalisations, ungrounded social capital arguments and higher-level concepts are not superficially considered. According to Skerit (2017:274-276), middle-class students have no problem performing well in school and in online higher education because they have an elaborated code. The transmission of knowledge is easy because they know how to analyse information and make generalisations: they have the ability to develop constructive arguments. These abilities give middle-class students an advantage over working-class students and also explain why middle-class students perform better in higher education online learning platforms than their working-class counterparts. Fataar (2018:7) posits:

Power marginalisation, therefore, ought not to be understood as signaling a stasis associated with material poverty, nor as necessarily entailing a lack of aspirational commitment, but as a fluid or liquid process in respect to how students work out viable educational pathways.

Differences exist between education systems that serve the working class and those that serve the middle class (Bhana, 2014:355). They differ in terms of the curricula and teaching methods they use at school level, so that it may lead to “easy access” for middle-class students to higher education spaces. These differences result in educational inequality among social classes (Abbas & McLean, 2010:244).

From our own experience, we have concluded that the middle-class student’s educational performance is better than that of the working-class student. Bernstein’s code theory explains how these differences in academic performance can be seen through the means of language, namely the restricted code and the elaborated code that divides the social classes. Bernstein’s critics labelled his code theory as having some limitations, arguing that Bernstein argued that working class language was deficient. One of his great opponents is Stubbs (1983), claims that Bernstein, “suggests that schools [and higher education institutions] are predicated

upon elaborated code: but one might equally say that they are predicated upon written language" (p. 285).

From a South African perspective, social code in online higher education, whether it be restricted or elaborated, is strongly influenced by students' proficiency in English. A student's use of the restricted code is usually as a result of English being their second or third language. Anecdotally, this is often why African students from further afield fare better than their black South African counterparts: simply put, their arguably superior knowledge of English gives them access to the elaborated code of academia.

Just as Bernstein came under fire, Bourdieu was similarly criticised for the way he framed learning and teaching relationships. According to Collins and Makowsky (1993:259), to interrogate Bourdieu's theory is important because it allows one to consider what factors contribute towards success, especially as a student in higher education. In it, we are eternally doomed to stratification. We cannot get outside our skins. We can only change places inside an iron circle. If that is the case, then will our education system forever benefit only the middle class? What Bourdieu omits from his theory is that power relations do change teaching and learning relations and with that, organisational and social stratification is reshaped and restructured (Sadovnik, 1991a).

If this social stratification is acknowledged and not ignored, we can move towards a positive online pedagogy (Cole, 2022), one in which students are taught by lecturers who demand a high cognitive presence, but also connect diverse social embodiment people groups. Put differently, Waghid et al. (2021:428) define a positive online learning space as one that:

... allows appropriate pedagogical practices to be implemented, which subsequently enhance students' online learning experiences. This implies more investment in online learning by affording lecturers opportunities to attain professional development sessions related to online learning, so that they know different ways of online teaching and catering for the diverse needs of students.

The challenge that online education posed for universities and departments at higher education institutions during Covid 19 remote and online teaching became evident that lecturers' professional development was seldom prioritised. This makes student-lecturer engagement, dialogue and care on these platforms very difficult and restricts the possibility of quality education taking place (Phejane, 2022). It is recommended that universities invest more in the instruction of their lecturers, so that they are knowledgeable about various methods of online teaching and are able to meet the varying demands of their students (Cicha et al., 2021; Fataar & Badroodien, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This article evaluated how deliberative democracy, through the Bourdieusian (social capital) and Bernsteinian (social code) model situated in the sociological approach, helped to interpret how the online higher education space can (or does not) inspire dialogue and care (Pietersen, 2024).

This discussion showed that procedural issues, such as pedagogy and ideology, are connected to socioeconomic considerations in online learning spaces at developing universities. Education, including higher education, can be seen as a process that divides people into certain social stratifications. In this case, it is a reproduction process that mostly benefits the middle class. Another function of education is that it prevents the working class from achieving higher levels of academic learning through assessment or exam failure. This can be seen as an eliminating function. Put plainly, if this social stratification in higher education and online learning is not acknowledged and interrogated, then real transformation cannot occur. As Czerniewicz et al. (2021:964) surmise:

The nexus of these transformational issues requires a new way of seeing and not unseeing what needs to remain visible. This is where the hope lies. The pandemic has been an MRI exposing the social bones.

Lecturers need to heed the call to disrupt the status quo insofar as it may contribute to the creation a new kind of social capital and an elaborated social code among working-class students, thereby enabling them to leapfrog their historic limitations and excel academically and in their chosen careers.

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